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SUBJECT: MILGROUP BOGOTA (2) -- CLOSING THE COLAR'S LEADERSHIP GAP

REF: BOGOTA 2290

Summary

¶11. Personnel shortages in officer and NCO positions are a handicap to expansion of the Colombian Army's fight against the FARC. With guidance from the U.S. Army Mission, the Colombians are piloting new faster-track training courses, drawing officer candidates from civilian college graduates and sourcing NCOs from among experienced professional soldiers. Aside from addressing immediate leadership gaps, the programs will inject a broader cross-section of Colombians into command levels and increase mobility prospects for professional recruits to rise to NCO roles.
End Summary.

¶12. This is the second in a series of cables profiling activities of the U.S. Military Group in Colombia. Its missions (Army, Navy, Air Force, Logistic, and Air Component Coordination Element) provide equipment and advisory support to the respective service arms of the COLMIL. Its Planning and Assistance Training Teams (PATTs) are units of two or three U.S. military personnel co-located with the Colombian Military, providing field training in combat skills and guidance to commanders and staff.

Shortages of Officers and NCOs

¶13. Severe personnel shortages in leadership positions are jeopardizing the Colombian Army's capacity to expand its war effort against the FARC. Due to rapid growth in its forces since 2002, the Army is short by 1,425 officers and 5,143 non-commissioned officers (NCOs). Roughly half of Army platoons are led by NCOs instead of officers, increasing the NCO deficit. Moreover, the Army continues to create new units, mostly offensive mobile brigades (BRIMs) to attack FARC strongholds; officers and NCOs who lead these BRIMs are pulled from existing units, exacerbating the problem. The current Army training system, both time consuming and expensive, does not produce sufficient leaders to man the new units, nor does it meet attrition levels of existing elements.

U.S. Leadership Training and Advice

¶4. The U.S. Army Mission (ARMIS) provides training courses to new Colombian Army (COLAR) officers and NCOs, and that cooperation has yielded a channel for strategic advice on leadership planning. Within the officer corps, ARMIS sends about 40 top-performing COLAR cadets each year to a six-week course in tactical leadership, preparing them to command small units of troops. Among senior NCOs, MILGP sponsors two courses annually across all branches of the Colombian military, jointly with other Latin countries. ARMIS also maintains a full-time exchange sergeant at the COLAR NCO Academy who updates training doctrine per U.S. standards. This engagement in educating new leaders has led to a trusted counselor role with the Military Forces Commander and senior COLAR staff on career progression and leadership planning, using U.S. models. Recommendations of more authority for NCOs, for example, have led COLAR to create the new senior NCO rank of Command Sergeant Major.

New Fast-Track Training

¶5. Recognizing its urgent need to expand leadership ranks, and following MILGP recommendations, the COLAR is supplementing its traditional training with shorter-duration alternatives. The Army Military Academy's standard officer course yields 550-600 line officers per year after a three-year program that is half academic and half military training. Beginning in June 2007, the Academy will run a new course, of just one and a half years of only military training, for 160 civilians already holding undergraduate degrees. For NCOs, the normal program involves 18 months of training followed by two years of duty with a (defensive) territorial unit before assignment to an offensive combat unit. The NCO school is now piloting a new course of only six months targeted to 360 professional soldiers who are already seasoned combat veterans.

Greater Breadth, Mobility

¶6. Aside from helping to address the COLAR's leadership gap, the new training courses represent paradigm shifts in commissioning of Army officers and sourcing of its NCOs. By accepting civilian college graduates as officer candidates, the COLAR will expand the breadth of Colombian society in its command positions. Sourcing NCOs from the enlisted ranks of professional soldiers grants a new channel of upward mobility for skilled and experienced fighters. The parallel creation of the rank of Command Sergeant Major aims to increase NCO influence by placing key NCO leaders at brigades and divisions, an important cultural shift for the Colombian military.

Drucker